



The accents of English: variety and change

When you start listening to the examples of English we have prepared, you might start asking yourself why there is so much variety in English. There isn't just one answer. The history of English is complex and complicated but at the same time fascinating. Let's begin.

Accents of England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland

We must remember that before, during and after the Romans left Britain, England, Wales or Scotland did not exist. The whole island was occupied by Celtic tribes.



Britain before the Anglo-Saxons

(Red = Brythonic Celtic; Blue = Pictish; Green = Goidelic Celtic)

Adventus Anglorum (The coming of the Angles)

The Anglo-Saxons started their invasion of the British Isles around 449. The Anglo-Saxons, that is, Angles, Saxons and Jutes took advantage of the power vacuum created by the retreating Roman armies (about 410) and eventually occupied most of what is now England.

These related but distinct Germanic peoples occupied different parts of England. Each tribe spoke slightly different versions of a Germanic language, so right from the very beginning there were several varieties of English.



Saxon Helmet

Viking Invasions

When the Vikings invaded the North-East and the Midlands around the end of the eighth century, they also brought with them their version of a common Germanic tongue. So from that time we had even more variety! The descendants of this Northern Germanic language can now be heard throughout Scandinavia.



Vikings

Although the Scandinavian invaders were victorious, in the end they adopted the Anglo-Saxon variety of Germanic. Proof of this can be found if one reads the inscription around the sundial at St Gregory's Minster in Kirkdale, North Yorkshire dated around 1055 to 1065. Both the names Orm and Gamal (right at the top "+ORM GAMAL") are Scandinavian but the words on the sundial are late Old-English (See <http://www.ling.upenn.edu/~kroch/scand/kirkdale.html>).



Sundial at St Gregory's Minster

However, although we have no record of how people spoke, the English in the area occupied by the descendants of the Vikings, the Danelaw, probably had a distinctive sound.



Division of England between Anglo-Saxons and Danish (Danelagh = Danelaw –in blue)

North and South

The division of England during that period probably contributed to the fact that for most people there is a clear distinction between southern English and northern English (According to Churchill the North begins above the River Trent, which runs through Nottingham). The further north we go, the greater the difference from the accents of the South. When you listen to our examples of the accents of Newcastle in England and Glasgow in Scotland, you might notice that they are similar. They even share some vocabulary like *bairn* meaning *child*. This demonstrates the fact that languages know no frontiers. The accent situation in the UK is typical of many languages, the accents furthest apart are the least similar while those closer to each other are often very similar.

Norman Conquest

With the Norman conquest in 1066, the differences between North and South became even greater and literary dialects survived throughout England. Some of the examples are *The Owl and The Nightingale*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Pearl*. English was no longer the language used in the Court and the possible standardizing influence that the English of the Court may have had disappeared.



Harold dies at the Battle of Hastings in 1066 which marked the beginning of the Norman Period

Substrate Languages

An important factor in language variation is the existence of a substrate language. The English accent in Wales has probably been influenced by the Brythonic language that we call Welsh and the Welsh themselves *Cymraeg*. The same occurs in the Republic of Ireland (also in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland) where the Celtic substrate has exercised its influence on vocabulary, syntax and accent. Some of these aspects can be heard in our examples. The accent of Northern Ireland, however, has nothing to do with a Celtic substrate. This is because many of the inhabitants of this part of Ireland came from Scotland. Thus the name Scots Irish for the variety of English that they speak. If you compare our examples of Glasgow and Belfast English you will see that the accents of Northern Ireland and the Lowlands of Scotland are quite similar. Some of the vocabulary is similar too, for example *wee* meaning *small*.

RP and Regional Varieties of English

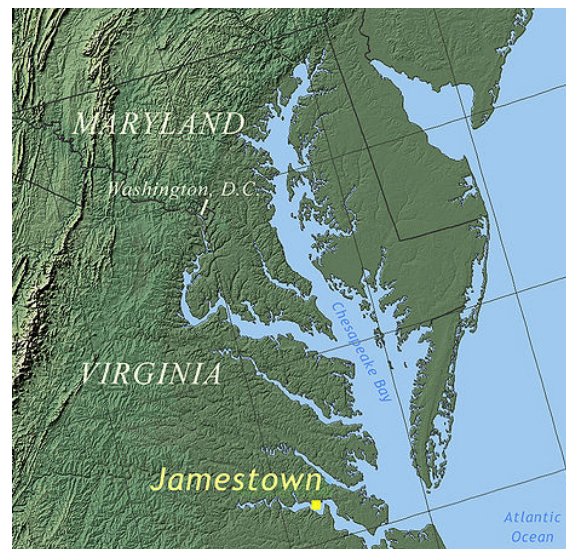
In spite of the development and spread of Received Pronunciation (RP) and Standard English together with the unifying influence of television and radio, regional and city accents are as strong as ever in many cases because they are a sign of geographical or social identity as in the case of Newcastle, Liverpool, Cornish English, and Cockney, all of which are included in our overview of accents of English.

The Spread of English beyond the British Isles

England was a seafaring nation and following the discoveries of the Spanish and the Portuguese, many adventurers attempted to find their fortune in new lands across the vast oceans. In the following sections we will see the many places the inhabitants of Britain and Ireland settled thus spreading English around the world.

English in America

In the early 1700s English was already present in Virginia and New England. By the time the rest of the United States had been settled, different accents could be heard throughout this vast country and, of course, neighbouring Canada.



English settlement in Jamestown, USA (1607).

We know that different areas of the United States were occupied by people from different parts of the British Isles. In New England the accent owes a lot to that of the South-East of England where there is no post-vocalic “r” so people pronounce words like *car* without a final “r”. As you

will hear in our examples, General American pronunciation *is* characterised by the post-vocalic “r”, probably due to the influence of the rhotic accents of England (like our example from Cornwall) and also Ireland and Scotland. The non-rhotic Southern American accent, of which we have a sample from North Carolina, owes its beginnings to settlers from the South of England, where post-vocalic “r” had disappeared or was in the process of disappearing. So just as in the case of the beginnings of English in England, regional variety is largely due to the origin of the people who settled in the different areas of United States. It is curious to note that in the UK the prestigious accent does not have a post-vocalic “r” (non-rhotic) while just the opposite is true in the USA. This goes to show that judgements of what “good” pronunciation is can be quite arbitrary.

English in Africa

English also spread to Jamaica and Africa in the 17th century. Here the influence of African languages is notable. This led to the creation of pidgins and creoles (see Jamaican example) and the use of English as an official language alongside African languages (see Nigerian example).



First permanent British settlement on the African continent made at James Island in the Gambia River. (Image of James Island and fort)

English in Australia and New Zealand

In the late 18th century Australia and New Zealand were discovered and settled. The accent of Australia owes a lot to the prisoners sent to the penal colonies in this country who mostly came from the London area.



Captain Cook whose discovery of Australia is now disputed.

English in India

During the 19th century the Indian subcontinent was colonised by the French and later by the English. Nowadays English is an official language in both India and Pakistan.



Map of India during colonial times before the partition of India and Pakistan

Once more, the English spoken in this vast area was influenced by the substrate languages. One of the characteristics of these accents of English is the presence of retroflex consonants of the languages of this region. If you listen carefully, you will hear them.

t l d n

Retroflex consonants

We hope you enjoy our journey through the accents of English and that you learn to appreciate the diversity of a language that people from all over the world have contributed to.

